

The Influence of National Culture on Expatriate Work Adjustment, Intention to Leave and Organizational Commitment

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Abstract

The movement of human resources across national borders has become a common practice in multinational organizations. The challenges international human resources face have become a subject of intense interest in the field of industrial and organizational psychology and human resource management. In view of this, the researchers investigated the influence of national culture on work adjustment, intention to leave host country and organizational commitment among expatriates in Ghana. Cross-sectional survey design was employed to investigate differences in work adjustment, intention to leave and organizational commitment between expatriates from collectivist and individualistic cultures. Data were collected from 111 expatriates using reliable research questionnaires. Independent t-test was used to test the hypotheses. It was observed that expatriates from collectivist cultures had fewer problems with adjustment than their counterparts from individualistic cultures. It was also observed that, expatriates from collectivist cultures had less intention of leaving the host country and significantly high level of organizational commitment compared to their counterparts from individualistic cultures. The findings are consistent with the person-culture fit theory. The implications for cross-cultural personnel selection and expatriates behaviour are discussed.

Keywords: National Culture, Work Adjustment, Intention to Leave, Expatriates, Organizational Commitment, Person-Culture Fit Theory, Ghana

Introduction

The national culture of people imprint on them critical values which governs their behaviour. The concept of national culture has become very important in expatriate studies due to the criss-crossing of employees across national borders of countries. The concept of national culture was popularized by Hofstede (1980) who in his famous study of the national cultures of people concluded that, people can generally be grouped into either collectivist or individualistic culture dimensions with people from Africa and Asia falling under the collectivist and those from Europe and the Americas falling under the individualistic orientation. Because individuals are born into a culture, have stayed, accepted and grew up with those cultural values, they generally will feel comfortable staying in an environment that suits their personality. Thus, expatriates from individualistic cultures working in Ghana will experience “culture conflict” given that the Ghanaian culture is predominantly collectivist (Hofstede, 1980). Psychologically, when an individual is in a state of discomfort, then the likelihood of that person exhibiting negative behaviours or doing everything possible to exit that environment is highly likely. This is an experience expatriates from individualistic cultures are likely to be confronted with as a result of culture shock (Oberg, 1960).

Globalization has resulted in the emergence of expatriates as an important category of global travelers (Selmer, 2002). For the purposes of this research an expatriate is a person who lives or works outside of his or her own home country on a non-permanent basis. The impact of cross-cultural experiences for expatriates has been conceptualized as culture shock (Oberg, 1960). Culture shock has been described as the “multifaceted experience resulting from numerous stressors occurring in contact with a different culture” (Winkelman, 1994, p. 121). Culture shock is characterized by the feelings of anxiety that result from losing familiar signs and symbols of social intercourse (Oberg, 1960). Cross-cultural encounters can result in strain, a sense of loss and deprivation, experiences of rejection, feelings of impotence or helplessness, and role confusion (Furnham, 1992; Oberg, 1960). These experiences may result in expatriate coping behaviors designed to either diminish emotional distress or to actively seek to change the origin of the stress (Selmer, 1999). Behavioral responses may, in turn, be shaped by available social resources (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). It is against this backdrop, that the researchers intimate that expatriates from individualistic cultures working in Ghana will be confronted with serious adjustment problems, demonstrate high intention to go back and also show less commitment to the organization in the host country (Ghana) due to this phenomenon of “culture conflict” of culture shock. In view of this, the researchers sought to empirically examine the influence of national culture (collectivist and individualistic dimensions) on expatriates work adjustment, intention to leave and organizational commitment.

Statement of Problem

The behaviour of employee's is vital for the success of organizations. The present study sought to find out how national cultures influence expatriates work adjustment, intention to leave and organizational commitment. It has

been established that, culture greatly influence behaviour (Hofstede, 1980). The national culture of an individual imbibes in the person specific values, norms and beliefs which reinforce certain behaviours from that person. Likewise, someone with a predominantly collectivist orientation has his/her behaviour fashioned by that culture. In this era of globalization, expatriation has become very common. This has created a situation where people from different cultures find themselves working in different cultures. Unfortunately, this has the tendency to throw expatriates off their feet as some tend to find themselves in a country with value systems completely different (collectivist/individualistic) from their predominant national culture (collectivist/individualistic). In view of this, the researchers sought to examine how differences in national cultures produce differences in expatriates work adjustment, intention to leave host nation, and organizational commitment in host nation.

Objectives of the Study

The study sought to:

- Investigate differences in expatriate work adjustment between expatriates from collectivist and individualistic cultures
- To examine differences in intention to leave host nation/country between expatriates from individualistic and collectivist cultures
- To find out differences in organizational commitment between expatriates from individualistic and collectivist cultures

Literature Review

Person-Culture Fit Theory

The researchers drew inspiration from the famous person-organization fit theory which views fit as congruence between the values of the person and an organization (Chatman, 1989). Theories of fit, person-job and person-organization fit emerged from research in the field of industrial and organizational psychology (Chatman, 1989; Kristof-Brown, Zimmerman, & Johnson, 2005). The concept of fit helps in understanding behaviour by considering both the individual and the environment in which the person operates. Thus, the interaction between the individual and environment is important because the individuals influence, and are influenced by their situations (Chatman, 1989). The researchers conceptualized this theory as person-culture fit to explain how national culture differences produce different behaviours. Individuals tend to achieve a balance psychologically when they find themselves in a setting that reflects values that are consistent with their dominant societal/cultural values. According to the person-environment/culture fit theory, when people are in a state of equilibrium with regards their work environment, it automatically triggers the release of positive work-related behaviours (Chatman, 1989). Against this backdrop, the researchers believe that, individuals from collectivist cultures will naturally find their feet/bearings easily working in a country whose predominant national culture is collectivist than working in a country whose national culture is predominantly individualistic. Consistent with this position taken by the researchers, it can be said that, expatriates from collectivist cultures working in Ghana which by the prescription and research findings posted by Hofstede (1980) is collectivist will demonstrate positive work-related behaviours like low intention to leave Ghana, less adjustment problems, and high level of organizational commitment compared to their counterparts from individualistic cultures. Individuals from individualistic cultures will experience the phenomenon of clash of cultures as their cultural values (individualistic) naturally will clash with the Ghanaian cultural values (collectivist). In this respect, the likelihood that they would experience challenges regarding adjustment would be high and this has its associated emotional consequences and hence attachment to the organization in the host nation would be affected seriously. Thus, where there is a fit between the person and national culture of the host country, the probability that the person will demonstrate positive behaviours in terms of high intention to stay, high organizational commitment and less adjustment problems is high.

National Culture

According to Robbins and Judge (2007) values differ across cultures and these differences are fundamentally important in predicting the behaviour of employees from different cultures. Hofstede (1980) is associated with the concept of national culture. The famous research on national culture conducted in the late 1970s by Hofstede (1980) discovered that employee's globally vary on five value dimensions of national culture ranging from power distance, individualism versus collectivism, masculinity versus femininity, uncertainty versus avoidance, and short-term versus long-term orientation. Given that expatriates work in different cultural setting, their behaviour can be viewed through the lenses of national culture. The study however, focused on individualism versus collectivism to determine the effect of these cultural differences on expatriate adjustment, organizational commitment and intention to leave the host country. According to Hofstede (1980), the country or continent of origin is an important criteria for classifying individuals into the two dominant cultures of collectivist and individualistic respectively. For instance, people from the African and Asian continent have been categorized under collectivist cultures while those from European continent and the west in general have been put under individualistic cultures as a result of their predominant value systems.

Expatriate Work Adjustment

The concept of expatriation has become popular as a result of globalization. Organizations are not only travelling, but personnel are also shipped to manage these organizations wherever they are located across the globe. An expatriate is therefore someone who lives or works outside his or her country of origin as an important representative of the parent organization on a non-permanent basis (Andreason, 2003; Ward, Bochner & Furnham, 2001). Because an expatriate most at times find him/herself in a different, adjustment has always been a problem for them. Accordingly, scholars have defined expatriate work adjustment to reflect this idea. For instance, Berry (1992) posits that adjustment is the fit between an individuals' attitudinal and behavioural inclination and the demands of the work environment. By extension, expatriate work adjustment has been defined as the degree of fit between the expatriate and his or her work environment and non-work environment (Aycan, 1997, p.436). Selmer et al (2000) witnessed that, expatriate work adjustment measures the ability of the expatriate to effectively manage the various aspects of the host country culture with regards difficulty experienced in managing day-to-day situations in the host culture while Black, Mendenhall and Oddou (1991) expressed that adjustment is the ability of the expatriate to get along with and effectively interact with host nationals, new culture and new environment. In this research, expatriate work adjustment is defined as the degree to which the expatriate successfully manage and fit into bot work and non-work environment in the host country (i.e. Ghana).

Intention to Leave

The psychological feeling regarding one voluntarily leaving his or her employing organization has been labeled turnover intention (Whiteman, 1999). Concerns about early termination of expatriates during international assignments have been a major concern for practitioners and scholars. In the view of Dolcos (2006), the intention to leave comes before the actual decision to exit. Thus, the expatriate who finds the host country uncomfortable particularly when he/she experiences cultural shocks, then, the person is likely to think of leaving the country. Psychologically, the expatriates especially those from individualistic cultures show the posture that "this place-Ghana- is not the right place for me to work".

Organizational Commitment

Organizational commitment is an important attitudinal variable which has engaged the attention of scholars in the field of industrial and organizational psychology. Despite the plethora of studies on the construct, there is no single and universally accepted definition of it. Thus, organizational commitment has been plagued with several definitions. Mowday, Porter and Steers (1982) submitted that, organizational commitment has behavioural and attitudinal components. The behavioural dimension reflects the individuals' sense of attachment to his or her own actions and not to the organization while the attitudinal component, the most widely studied dimension looks at commitment from the perspective of relationship between the employee and the organization.

Giving that the individual and the environment in which they work have a natural link, scholars have generally defined organizational commitment with the individual-organization linkage in mind. For instance, Mathieu and Zajac (1990) conceptualized organizational commitment as an attitude that shows that nature and quality of relationship that exist or connect the employee and the organization in which he/she works. Mowday et al. (1982) expressed organizational commitment as an attitude with affective and continuance dimensions with a highly committed employee having: (a) strong belief in and acceptance of the organization's goals and values; (b) willingness to exert considerable effort on behalf of the organization; and (c) strong desire to maintain membership in the organization. The researchers thus, view organizational commitment as the emotional and psychological feelings an employee has towards his or her employing organization.

National Culture, Expatriate Work Adjustment, Intention to Leave and Organizational Commitment

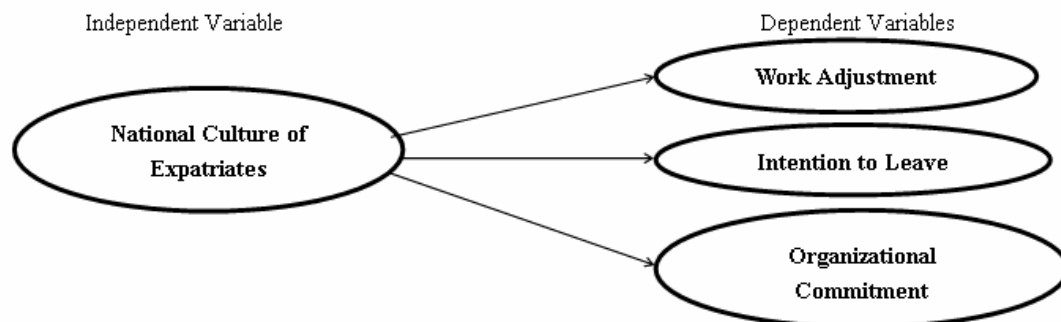
Differences in expatriates behaviour is greatly influenced by the value systems of their culture. In this regard, it is expected that expatriates from individualistic cultures working in a collectivist culture like Ghana will experience significant levels of anxiety as a result of differences in dominant national values (Oberg, 1960). Research in the field of organizational behaviour has demonstrated showed that where employees' values fit with the culture of their organization, their job satisfaction and commitment tends to increase while intention to leave the organization decrease (Verquer, Beehr & Wagner, 2003). This result is a testimony that the same situation characterizes the behaviour of expatriates working in a different cultural setting. Specifically, expatriates from individualistic cultures working in Ghana will experience high level of dissatisfaction, less commitment and high intention to leave the host country as a result of lack of fit between their home-country's value system and host-country value system. In view of this, problems with work adjustment, high intention to leave and low commitment will manifest in their attitude. These assertions are also consistent with the person-culture fit theory (Chatman, 1989).

Statement of Hypotheses

- Expatriates from collectivist cultures are more likely to experience less adjustment problems than their counterparts from individualistic cultures

- Expatriates from collectivist cultures are less likely to think of leaving the host country/nation than their counterparts from individualistic cultures.
- Expatriates from collectivist cultures are more likely to demonstrate significantly high level of organizational culture than their counterparts from individualistic cultures

Summary of Hypothesized Relationship between the Independent Variable and Dependent Variables



Research Design

The study utilized a cross-sectional survey design to investigate the differences in work adjustment and intention to leave host country between expatriates from collectivist and those from individualistic cultures. This design was found appropriate because the researchers sought to find out differences in work adjustment, intention to leave host country and organizational commitment among expatriates working in multinational companies in Ghana. Data was collected from expatriates from different cultures at a single point in time using questionnaire. The research was purely quantitative because numeric data was gathered using questionnaire.

Sample Size and Sampling Techniques

Non-probability sampling strategy was used to select the participants (i.e. expatriates) and organizations for the study. Specifically, convenience sampling method was used to select the organizations and expatriates for the study. Thus, organizations (i.e. multinational companies) that agreed to participate were served questionnaires. Similarly, expatriates were selected conveniently. Out of the 200 questionnaires administered, only 111 duly completed were retrieved and used for the data analysis. Thus, a response rate of 55.5% was attained in this study. Specifically, the sample comprised Nigerians, Indians, British, Lebanese, French, Norwegian, Nigeriens, Cameroonian, and European nationals. The sample was drawn from organizations like Ghacem, Bollore Africa, Accra Brewery Limited, Somo Vision Ghana Limited, Kofi Annan International Peace Keeping Centre, and Institute of Local Government, Ghana. In terms of distribution of the sample with regards job position of expatriates, it was observed that, the large majority of expatriates working in Ghana hold managerial positions (76.6%) while only 23.4% were found to be in the non-managerial category. It was also observed that, the majority expatriates were males (89.2%) with only 11.8% being females. Finally, about 75.7% of expatriates were from the collectivist cultures with only 35.3% of them coming from individualistic cultures.

Instrument/Measures

National culture was measured with a single item. Participants were asked to indicate their country of origin. Based on the classification of people into collectivist and individualistic cultures per the criteria proposed by Hofstede (1980), the researchers measured this variable appropriately. Work adjustment was measured using two different scales. Specifically, the scales by Black (1988) and Black and Stephens (1989) were used. This scale has been endorsed as a standard scale for measuring expatriate adjustment giving its application to numerous multinational samples in various national locations (Black & Stephen, 1989; McEvoy & Parker, 1995; Selmer et al., 2000; Shaffer et al., 1999). It is a 7-point scale ranging from very unadjusted (1) to completely adjusted (7). It contains three (3) subscales with acceptable reliability values. The subscales are: general adjustment ($\alpha=.89$), interactional adjustment ($\alpha=.86$) and work adjustment ($\alpha=.79$). Sample items on the general adjustment scale included "living conditions in general", "Housing conditions" etc.; interaction adjustment scale had items like "interacting with Ghanaian nationals outside of work", "speaking with Ghanaian nationals"; and work adjustment had items like "Performance standards and expectations", "Specific job responsibilities". Intention to leave was measured using Black & Stephens (1989). The scale originally had two items. But Caie (2009) added a third item to the scale to meet the minimum number of items on a scale for factor analysis. Thus, the three item scale the two items by Black and Stephen and a single item by Caie (2009) were used to measure intention to leave in the study. The three item scale has a reliability coefficient of 0.71. It is based on a 7-point response format ranging from strongly agree (7) to strongly disagree (1). Higher score means high intention to leave and low score meant low intention to leave.

Procedure

The researchers sought permission from multinational organizations involved in the study as prescribed by the APA ethical code. All the necessary procedures required to guarantee the ethical acceptability of the research findings were adhered to. Specifically, confidentiality of the information was strictly ensured by providing envelopes into which participants put completed questionnaires and sealed. Participation in the study was absolutely voluntary and anonymity of participants was also ensured. All vital information about the study was made available to the participants to enable them make informed decision. Questionnaires were administered after participants agreed to participate in the study. Each participant was given a questionnaire to complete and return. Each questionnaire came with clear instructions as to how to go about completing it. Data collection started in February 2013 and ended in May 2013.

Pilot study was first conducted to determine the suitability of the items or instruments for the study in Ghana before collection of the main data began. The instruments used in the study had acceptability psychometric properties and therefore were good for the study in the Ghanaian setting. The reliability coefficient for the three research instruments was: Work Adjustment ($\alpha=.82$), Organizational commitment ($\alpha=.70$), and intention to leave host country ($\alpha=.70$). No complaints were made regarding difficulty in understanding items on the work adjustment, intention to leave and organizational commitment scale. The pilot study was conducted with a convenient sample of 20 expatriates.

Results

The Statistical Product and Services Solution (SPSS) version 20.0 was used to facilitate the statistical analysis in the study. Independent t-test was used to test each of the hypotheses stated in the study. This parametric statistical test was used because the independent variable (national culture) is categorical with two levels (collectivist versus individualistic) and the dependent variables (work adjustment, organizational commitment and turnover intention) are continuous. In addition, the dependent variables are assumed to be measured on an interval scale. The effect sizes of the independent variables were also calculated using eta square. The magnitude of the effect sizes and their contribution were determined using the guideline provided by Cohen (1988). According to Cohen (1988), the criteria for interpreting effect sizes are: .01=small effect, .06=moderate effect, .14=large effect.

Summary of Mean, Standard deviation scores and Independent t-test result of Differences in Work Adjustment between Expatriates from Collectivist and Individualistic Cultures

Variables	N	Mean	SD	df	t	Sig.	Eta
Collectivist	84	76.905	6.654	109	4.924	0.000	0.18
Individualistic	27	63.667	13.451				
Total	111	140.572	20.105				

As shown in Table above, expatriates from collectivist cultures demonstrated significantly less adjustment problems than their counterparts from individualistic cultures [$t_{(109)}=4.924$, $p=.000$, Eta Squared=0.18]. This signifies that expatriates from collectivist cultures felt comfortable with the Ghanaian working environment ($M=76.905$, $SD=6.667$) than their counterparts from individualistic cultures ($M=63.667$, $SD=13.451$). The Eta squared value indicates that, the independent variable (national culture-individualistic and collectivist) had a large effect on expatriates work adjustment. It also shows that 18% of the variance in expatriate work adjustment is explained by national culture.

Summary of Means, Standard deviation scores and Independent t-test result of the Effect of National Culture on Expatriate Intention to Leave Host Country

Variables	N	Mean	SD	df	t	Sig.	Eta
Collectivist	84	14.988	2.864	109	5.206	.000	0.199
Individualistic	27	12.333	2.094				
Total	111	27.321	4.958				

Also, the prediction that expatriates from collectivist cultures are less likely to demonstrate intention to leave their host country than their counterparts from individualistic cultures was supported [$t_{(109)}=5.206$, $p=.000$, Eta Squared=0.199]. This implies that, expatriates from collectivist cultures felt at home ($M=14.988$, $SD=2.864$) compared to their counterparts from individualistic cultures who probably felt they were in a strange land ($M=12.333$, $SD=2.094$). National culture had a large effect on expatriates' intention to leave the host country (eta squared=0.199). The effect size also suggests that, national culture explains 19.9% of the variance in intention to leave host nation.

Summary of Mean, Standard deviation scores and Independent t-test result of the Effect of National Culture on Expatriates Organizational Commitment

Variables	N	Mean	SD	df	t	Sig.	Eta
Collectivist	84	84.667	12.952	109	1.995	.049	0.04
Individualistic	27	81.667	2.675				
Total	111	166.334	15.627				

Finally, the hypothesis that, expatriates from collectivist cultures will demonstrate significantly high level of organizational commitment in the host country than their individualistic counterparts was supported [$t_{(109)} = 1.995$, $p = .049$, Eta Squared = 0.04]. This means that, expatriates from collectivist cultures scored significantly high on organizational commitment compared to those from individualistic cultures. National culture explained just 4% of the variance in expatriates organizational commitment (eta squared = 0.04). This translates to a small effect size in terms of the contribution of national culture on organizational commitment.

Discussion

Culture is an integral part of human existence because it is the source of our behaviour in all endeavours. Against this backdrop, the present study in the light of the two major national cultures, sought to find out the extent to which expatriates from different cultures differ with respect to their work adjustment, intention to leave host country and their commitment to organization in the host country. Based on the research objectives, the researchers tested three hypotheses. As expected, the prediction that, expatriates from collectivist cultures will demonstrate significantly less work adjustment problems than their counterparts from individualistic cultures was supported. Similarly, the study found expatriates from collectivist cultures to demonstrate significantly less intention to leave the host country (Ghana) compared to their counterparts from individualistic cultures. Finally, the researchers endorsed the prediction that expatriates from collectivist cultures will demonstrate significantly high level of commitment towards their organization than their counterparts from individualistic cultures. These findings corroborated previous findings (Chatman, 1989; Oberg, 1960; Robbins & Judge, 2007; Verquer, Beehr & Wagner, 2003). It is worthy to note that, people generally feel comfortable in settings that have similar values as their societal values. Lack of value congruence has been found to create serious problems. As indicated by Oberg (1960), the tendency for people to experience cultural shock increases when they find themselves in a different environment. Psychologically, expatriates find themselves in a state of anxiety as a result of significant differences in dominant cultural values.

Limitation of the study

Despite the significant findings and their relevance in international personnel selection, the study is not isolated from some theoretical challenges. Methodologically, the sampling strategies utilized make it impossible to generalize the outcome of the study. Though national culture was found to significantly influence behaviours like work adjustment, intention to leave and organizational commitment among expatriates, it was not adequate enough to enable the researchers draw conclusions regarding the fact that national culture caused these behaviours in multinational settings.

Implications of Findings

The findings obtained in the study have significant implications for international personnel selection and training in multinational organizational settings. It is clear from the empirical findings that, the national culture of an expatriate can facilitate or inhibit his or her ability to fit well into a particular. Thus, the selecting of personnel for assignees to take into account the national culture of the assignee as well as the national culture of the country that would be hosting the expatriate. Further to this, it is imperative that where there is no fit between the expatriates' national culture and that of the host nation, training on the host country's culture is provided to ensure that the person knows much about the predominant cultural values.

Recommendation for Future Research

The need to examine the extent to which culture training moderate the relationship between national culture and expatriate work adjustment, intention to leave and organizational commitment should be considered in future studies. Replicating this study in other multicultural settings is also required to strengthen the evidence reported in the study. Finally, examining variables like cultural intelligence and resilience is welcomed since a resilient expatriate will be able to cope effectively with the subtle differences that he/she will be confronted with in this different setting.

Conclusion

The culture of a country imprints on people specific values, norms and beliefs which naturally can be used to predict behaviour. Thus, the national culture of an expatriate has the propensity to determine their behaviour during international assignments. The question about culture or value fit becomes a major source of worry for practitioners, consultants and scholars in the field of industrial and organizational psychology and human resource management as the transport of globe talent has become an important exercise multinational companies

will continue to perform. As observed in the current study, expatriates from individualistic cultures demonstrated significantly high intention to leave Ghana (i.e. the host country), adjustment problems and less commitment to the organization than their counterparts from collectivist cultures. The findings obtained in the study is consistent with the person-culture fit theory which indicates that people tend to exhibit negative behaviours when they find themselves in a different cultural setting than when there is a congruence between their dominant cultural values and that of the host nations'. International personnel selection practices must therefore be done taken into consideration the core value systems of the country or countries that are going to host the international assignees (i.e. expatriates).

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